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Fit for Purpose? Fitting Ontological Security Studies ‘into’ the Discipline of International Relations: Towards a Vernacular Turn

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Introduction

For many decades now, scholars in the discipline of International Relations (IR), and beyond, have struggled to create and sustain boundaries around the meaning of the concept of ‘security’ (Baldwin 1997; Huysmans 1998; Wolfers 1952). One of the latest such incarnations of this struggle has been around the theory and application of *ontological security*, its meaning, role, and added value. Scholars legitimately ask, How should ontological security studies be developed *within* IR? Indeed, should such studies be developed at all, or should they be kept in a position ‘outside’ the legitimate space of IR, confined to other parts of the social sciences, in order to keep the discipline more focussed? These are key and live debates, and ones that we aim to explore and push further with reference to several new points of departure in this article.

We argue that there is a particular character to the performance of IR scholarship (of course, there is a particular character to all epistemic entities), one that acts to close and police the boundaries of the discipline in ways that reflect dominant power-knowledge relations. This closure and policing of boundaries has led to the development of what we identify as two strands of work in ontological security studies in IR, which divide on the questions of ontological choice and the deployment of the concept of dread. Neither strand is intellectually superior and both contain notable differences internal to themselves.¹ That it is possible to

identify these two strands, however, is the product of the performance of IR scholarship, and the two strands themselves perform two distinct roles. One allows ontological security studies to engage with the ‘mainstream’ in IR; the other allows the ‘international’ elements of ontological security to be engaged with other parts of the social sciences. Ironically, both can be read as symptoms of the way in which the discipline continues to be structured by issues pertaining to its *own* ontological (in)security as a field of inquiry, which is a key theme of our discussion.

In order to develop this argument and open up space for future research programmes in ontological security studies beyond the limits of the current disciplinary debate, the article works through four sections: the first seeks to illustrate the primary ways in which the concept of ontological security has been understood in IR with reference to paradigmatic authors associated with the approach (notably Huysmans 1998; Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005, 2008; and Zarakol); the second and third sections develop the theme of there being two distinct strands of scholarship in ontological security studies divided across ontological choices and the centrality of dread (drawing in particular on the work of Steele 2005, 2008). We reflect on these intellectual dynamics and their limitations and implications in the fourth section; here we open the possibility of a connection between ontological security studies in IR and the emerging interdisciplinary fields of ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ security studies – via the mutual interest in biographical narratives of the self and the work that they do politically – to the collective benefit of these areas of research.

IR and the reconstitution of ontological security

As the millennium approached, there was considerable debate about the nature of IR as an academic discipline. Of course, much was tied up in the debate between the ‘isms’, as

complex and rival epistemologies were reduced to three key pillars: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The discipline was subject to review and prognosis, along with many other aspects of social life. Ole Waever (1998) had famously pointed to the American nature of much of the scholarship in IR. Steve Smith (2000: 375) wrote that ‘... positivism dominates, especially in the United States, and dominates to such an extent that other epistemological positions remain peripheral.’ He went on: ‘In my view IR remains an American social science both in terms of the policy agenda that US IR exports to the world in the name of relevant theory and in terms of the dominant (and often implicit) epistemological and methodological assumptions contained in that theory’ (Smith 2000: 399).

The discipline (or, perhaps, sub-discipline) of IR had come to define itself – to strive for its own ontological security – via narratives of internal disagreement. It was constructed through the foundational myths of so-called great debates (though this itself was based on highly problematic assumptions as to the ‘First Great Debate’) (Wilson 1998). The (arguably) four ‘great debates’ of IR divided scholars (and still does) into particular camps (Waever 1996). Why does this matter for the substantive study of ontological security? Because, we would argue, this internal division within the discipline has led to an inward looking focus, and arguably has led to a closure – relatively stronger than in many other disciplines in the social sciences – to more widespread interdisciplinary engagement. Power in the discipline of IR comes from securing a position within the discipline, not from extending it or opening it up to new influences. And securing a position is largely a matter of being published in the key journals.

So if one accepts this contention – that the divided terrain of the discipline of IR leads to a relatively strong closure of the discipline’s boundaries to interdisciplinary work – then there are clear implications for understanding the contribution that ontological security studies can make within IR. Essentially, this is that in order to be able to ‘fit’ *into* IR the study of

ontological security has to be ‘normalised’ to the standards and expectations of dominant IR scholarship. There are two key dimensions to this; first, the nature of the ‘ontology’ in ontological security; and second, the pivotal nature of the concept of ‘dread’ in ontological security. The next two sections will examine these dimensions, from the perspective that the way that ontological security has been deployed in the discipline of IR is significantly different from how it has been deployed in other disciplines in the social sciences. In the final section, we will then seek to explore the possibility for embedding ontological security studies ‘into’ the field of IR through a different route; via an engagement with the emerging interdisciplinary sub-fields of ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ security studies all of which, we argue, share an interest in the intersubjective onto-politics of biographical narratives of the self. Via this intersection we connect the theoretical underpinnings of ontological security studies with a new empirical agenda for future research inspired by the vernacular and everyday turns.

The ontology question: Intersubjectivity and the state

When R. D. Laing (1990: 39) introduced the term ‘ontological security’ he wrote: ‘Despite the philosophical use of ‘ontology’ ... I have used the term in its present empirical sense because it appears to be the best adverbial or adjectival derivative of ‘being’.’ For Laing, this was the *individual* human being; he wanted to understand how ontological insecurity could lead to incapacity for a person. As he wrote:

A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such, he can live out into the world, and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole and continuous.

Such a basically *ontologically* secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity (Laing 1990: 39).²

Now of course Laing was not treating an individual as a disconnected unit; his focus was at the level of the individual because he wanted to understand more about '... schizoid and schizophrenic persons... Such a person is not able to experience himself "together with" others or "at home in" the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as "split" in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on' (Laing 1990: 17). So the focus on the individual for Laing was a function of the problem that he sought to address – understanding schizoid and schizophrenic persons – *not* a philosophical expression of the nature of the ontology itself. Such a conclusion can be taken from the sub-title of his key book on the subject: *The Divided Self – An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*.

This point was clarified by Anthony Giddens (1991). The life of an individual can only be ontologically secure if certain elements are taken for granted, that which he described as the 'natural attitude.' For Giddens (1991: 37), 'The natural attitude brackets out questions about ourselves, others and the object-world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep on with everyday activity.' Now of course, such questions are not and cannot be resolved into a natural attitude by each individual person alone and separately; rather, the 'natural attitude' is constructed intersubjectively. As Giddens explains, 'What makes a given response 'appropriate' or 'acceptable' necessitates a shared – but unproven and unproveable – framework of reality (Giddens 1991: 36).'

The basic tenets of ontological security studies remind us that for Laing and Giddens, the ontology concerns the individual, but this is an individual who is embedded intersubjectively into a web of social understandings. As (removed for anonymity) has argued elsewhere, the key elements of an ontological security framework are a biographical continuity, a cocoon of trust relations, self integrity, and dread, all of which apply at the level of the individual, and all of which are constructed intersubjectively. There has to be, first, a biographical continuity, a storyline for each individual which is both easily grasped reflexively by the individual regardless of levels of education, and also one that is easily communicable to those around. This story, this narrative, is fragile, because of course it is only one reading of events, and may be subject to other, 'hostile' readings; but for the ontologically secure individual, it will also be robust, and short of crisis situations (which by definition puts the linear storyline in jeopardy), will be able to withstand significant changes in the social environment. The second element involves the construction of and maintenance of a web of trust relations, to enable the individual to operate within a cocoon that protects and filters out dangers to the self in everyday life. For those individuals enjoying a measure of ontological security, there will be trust in particular items ('social tokens', as Giddens describes them) and in individuals (professionals and experts). In the natural attitude, the ontologically secure individual does not worry about the collapse of that trust. And in the third element, there is a self-integrity, an ability to be 'alive' in Laing's sense, which is to act within the scope of those elements under reflexive control. The social structure created allows the ontologically secure individual to map his or her decisions on a predictable basis, in relation to his or her reading of their own biography.³ The fourth element, dread, we shall discuss later in a separate section.

This discussion, however, is still largely alien to a mainstream IR reading; that is, for many IR scholars it is simply *not* proper to (a particular, proprietorial understanding of) the discipline. Of course, vitally important contributions to ontological security studies have been

made in the extant literature; but we would argue that some of them have been made by re-reading Laing and Giddens in fundamental ways that fit their original frameworks into IR. In ‘Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma’, for example, Jennifer Mitzen (2006: 345) is quite explicit: ‘...since my goal is to engage realist IR theory, which treats states as rational actors, I develop the concept of ontological security with respect to rational agency ...’. As such, Mitzen’s paradigmatic account requires a re-description of the referent object of the ontological, away from individuals, and towards states – their routines, their boundaries. The same move from the Laing-Giddens framework to a statist ontology more acceptable to IR is also evident in Ayse Zarakol’s (2010) detailed empirical study of Turkey’s and Japan’s refusals to apologise for historical crimes, which she reads as a performance of ontological (in)security and an attempt by those states to reproduce their identities and sense of ‘self’. Similarly, Brent Steele’s work (2005, 2008), like Mitzen’s and Zarakol’s, also seeks to engage with (by challenging) the discipline of IR: of ontological security, Steele (2008: 2-3) writes that ‘... its fulfilment affirms a state’s self-identity (i.e. it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others). Nation states seek ontological security because they want to maintain *consistent self-concepts*, and the “Self” of states is constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinized foreign policy actions.’ That said, in focussing on the state’s self-reflexive understanding of its ‘self’ and on the narratives of states’ elites, Steele’s statism arguably alters the Laing-Giddens framework less than Mitzen’s.⁴

Now it is absolutely not our intention to portray the intellectual routes adopted by the IR scholars referred to above as somehow inaccurate or inappropriate readings of Laing and Giddens. We do not want to argue that ontological security is inapplicable at the level of the state.⁵ Rather, our point is that this route is itself constructed by – and services the ontological

security needs of – a particular story about the discipline of IR; its relative closure to interdisciplinarity requires the canon of ontological security studies to be reconsidered. The value is that this is a way of introducing a hugely rich and promising vein of social scientific research into IR. The potential cost is that this is done by recalibrating the concept of ontological security in a fashion that makes it almost unrecognisable to those who use the framework in other disciplines.

One way of considering this problematique is to examine the move that Mitzen makes to connect her work with ontological security studies. Giddens (1991: 167) argued that ‘The development of relatively secure environments of day-to-day life is of central importance to the maintenance of feelings of ontological security. Ontological security, in other words, is sustained primarily through routine itself.’ This focus on the role of routine at the level of the individual is then transposed to the state level, to suggest for example that the value in routine might be so great that states might privilege routine over other values, for example, escaping from damaging conflictual relations, even when physical cost and harm is involved (Mitzen 2006: 342). One could draw an analogy with an individual who continues with the routine even though in an abusive relationship. Such moments are often best expressed by those directly involved. In an online post, ‘Aunt Becky’ wrote of her struggle to leave an emotionally abusive partner: ‘The worst feeling was knowing that I was missing something that wasn’t good for either of us. I knew the relationship was dysfunctional and could never be fixed, but I still missed it. I missed the comfort and familiarity I’d had with him, even if he wasn’t always so kind to me’ (The Stir 2012). This commitment, then, is directly transformed from individuals to states, and so for Mitzen (2006: 347), routine underscores identity and can thereby explain why states can continue with ‘irrational’ conflictual relations.

This move to a different ontological level though cannot be found in other parts of the social sciences engaging with the same intellectual canon. Ontological security studies can be found

across the social sciences, where the Laing-Giddens framework gives insights into particular issues. Crossley (2003) examined the way in which serious illness impacts upon ontological security of individuals. Danermark and Möller (2008) examined the impact of processes of trust and social recognition on the ontological security of deaf blind people. Boucaut (2001) used the framework to examine bullying in the workplace. Padgett (2007) used ontological security as the key concept to understand different strategies to manage those with severe mental health issues in New York City. Dupuis and Thorns (1998) argued that the routines created by home occupancy were a major contribution to the ontological security of older New Zealanders. Biographical continuity, a cocoon of trust relations, and self-integrity underpins all of these analyses of the lives of groups of individuals. And it is this that gives us an alternative way of constructing ontological security studies in the discipline of IR.

Interestingly, one of the earliest attempts to engage the concept of ontological security in the discipline of IR – Jef Huysmans' 1998 article 'Security! What do you mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier' – was fundamentally ambivalent in its referent object. Far from reifying an unproblematised ontology of the state, Huysmans' piece is notable for its attention to the work that the concept of 'security' does in a diversity of texts – as a 'thick signifier' that defines social relations in relation to death. In Huysmans' view, moreover, 'daily security' and 'ontological security' refer to potentially two separate signifying practices: the former – associated with threat definition, perception, construction, and management – 'articulates a strategy of survival, which consists of trying to postpone death by countering objectified threats'; the latter – connected with the political question of the constitution of the social order – refers to 'a strategy of managing the limits of reflexivity [...] by fixing social relations into a symbolic and institutional order' (Huysmans 1998: 242). However, while in principle separate, Huysmans argued that the daily security struggle is always in danger of

collapsing into ontological security – a collapse that, writing in the late-1990s, he foresaw as characteristic of the post-Cold War era.

In many ways picking up where Huysmans left off, and under conditions of globalisation in which the state is no longer central in IR, Catarina Kinnvall (2006: 31) has argued that ‘Ontological security is maintained when home is able to provide a site of constancy in the social and material environment ... Home, in other words, is a secure base on which identities are constructed.’ Kinnvall’s – and to some extent Huysmans’ – approach is one that connects with the analyses of Crossley, Dupuis and Thorns et al more readily. ‘Home’ in this sense might appear to be the antithesis of the ‘international’; but it is not, because ‘home’ is not a fixed referent object. Ontological security becomes a means for understanding multiple international identities; Kinnvall (2006: 172) writes ‘Imagining the nation, especially in its religious form, has become a way for many migrants to solve a crisis of ontological security and existential identity.’ In her classic study of the international dynamics of ‘Indian’ identities, she wrote: ‘Hindu nationalism, although complex and multifaceted, supports the notion that religion and nationalism, in combination, act as powerful responses to the individual quest for ontological security in a rapidly changing world (Kinnvall 2006: 137).’ The intersubjectively constructed religions and nationalisms led to specific resources deployed by individuals in their search for ontological security, resources that can be deployed to construct a biographical continuity, a set of trust figures, and a description of acceptable and appropriate behaviours within which self-integrity can be described. In contrast, states do not have ‘homes’. There are fora in which state actors engage, but physical territory is the bodily form of statehood, rather than a practice of home that allows a connection with other scientific applications of ontological security.

Importantly, in this discussion we are *not* arguing that those working more akin to the Laing-Giddens framework are ‘right’, and that those working to fit this into the dominant statist

ontology of IR are ‘wrong’ (or that the former challenges the discipline of IR while the latter reproduces it); rather, we want to argue that these represent different emphases and ways of engaging ontological security studies in relation to the concept of the international: Mitzen’s examination of the routines of states allows a route to engage a wider IR disciplinary audience, which has created an important space for contact; Kinnvall’s focus on the social allows the international to be embedded into ontological security studies and in so doing allows for an engagement with the ways in which ontological security is utilised elsewhere in the social sciences. Our own position, as we shall go on to develop, is one that calls for a recovery of the ambivalence found originally in Huysmans’ seminal piece – one that neither focuses exclusively on the state to conform to the dominant identity narrative of mainstream IR nor one that throws out the state (see also Steele 2016). In this way there is an opportunity to see not only how dominant IR demands a rereading of ontological security studies, but also to investigate further how the latter has a potentially transformative capacity vis-à-vis the former.

Downplaying dread

Earlier in this piece we set out an understanding of ontological security that comprises four key elements: biographical continuity, trust relations, self-integrity, and dread. In the writings of Laing and Giddens, ‘dread’ plays a central role. Laing (1960: 43) wrote about the anxiety faced by the ontologically insecure individual as being in three forms: engulfment, implosion and petrification. Each of these anxieties Laing then described in terms of dread. That is, anxiety and dread tended to be used by Laing coterminously. In *The Divided Self*, Laing writes of ‘anxiety’ fifty-one times, of ‘dread’ forty-three times. Perhaps inspired by Laing’s mention of Kierkegaard on seven separate occasions, Giddens sought to give a philosophical

underpinning to what in essence was a clinician's account in Laing's work.⁶ Giddens (1991: 37) wrote 'The chaos that threatens on the other side of the ordinariness of everyday conventions can be seen psychologically as *dread* in Kierkegaard's sense: the prospect of being overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of our coherent sense of 'being in the world.'" Dread, then, is not about physical destruction – it is an anxiety about the very being, the very sense of the self.

Dread is, however, another analytical axis according to which the literature in IR is divided. It is, for example, far less central in Mitzen's (2006) account of the importance of routine to states. It is hugely relevant in one section on the social, when she wrote about the intersubjective level of fear that permeated the United States after the attacks of 9/11, where people found it hard to go out, and hard to stay at home, because of the anxiety connected with the uncertainty of where threat might come from. But when it comes to the level of states, it is hard to articulate how a state – as opposed to a population, or a ruling elite – might be anxious. Of course, dread is nevertheless implicit in Mitzen's analysis; the point of the power of routine is that its practice itself is a means of holding dread at bay. It is not, however, foregrounded; indeed, within the discipline of IR, exploring the sense of dread of the American state, and seeking to have that published in journals with high impact factors, would be perhaps rather challenging in the current power-knowledge ecology of the discipline.

For Steele (2005, 2008), dread and anxiety have a more overt role to play. In *Ontological Security in International Relations*, as we see in the earlier quotation, Steele establishes a focus on self-integrity. Where a state does not behave in accordance with what it has deemed to be acceptable and appropriate, particularly during 'critical situations' (crises), gaps open between actors' actions and their self-integrity, leading to what Steele describes as shame. One example he gives is that of NATO's intervention in Kosovo and shame over historical

memories and experiences (Steele 2008: 115). Shame, as a motivator of policy, particularly in crises, is tied to identity and to that sense of dread (see also Karakol 2010). Steele (2008: 61), following Giddens, links dread directly to Kierkegaard, quoting the distinction between fear (being something definite) and dread, which results from the ‘dizziness of freedom’.

Dread, however, is absolutely at the centre of Laing’s analysis of ontological security. It is the psychological reality of dread – through engulfment, implosion and/or petrification – that is the core feature of the ontologically insecure. And thereby, it is the resource that can be deployed to keep dread at bay through routine, through dependence on trust tokens, which creates a spine for the biographical narrative of the individual, which describes the actions based on self-integrity that to the individual are appropriate and acceptable. That is, dread, and its management, is the core of understanding ontological security. That management (or the lack thereof) is hugely complex, and depends on a whole series of interlocking routines that can, at any moment, be challenged by a crisis situation. As Roger Silverstone (1993: 573-4) wrote, ‘The institutions which we have inherited and which we still struggle to maintain: family, household, neighbourhood, community, nation ... are those institutions which have historically been the containers of, and provided resources for, our ability to sustain that defence [against chaos and dread].’⁷ For Silverstone, particularly for those lacking mobility, and for those in the developed world, an additional institution providing resources to manage dread is television. It is entirely consistent to argue that social media may now also play that function.

This is critically important, because what it tells us is that ontological security studies are primarily about investigating mechanisms for managing dread – the fear of absolute engulfment, implosion and/or petrification. The ontologically secure position – if such a thing exists (see Browning and Joenniemi 2016) – is in fact incredibly precarious and highly political. In drawing upon resources that help to manage that sense of dread, individuals

perform routines that may themselves lead to the securitisation of others (reference removed for anonymity). Silverstone wrote of key institutions of routine as including ‘...family, household, neighbourhood, community, nation ...’, and each of those has been performed collectively against the interests and security of other groups over time. For example, ‘family’ and ‘household’ routines have been performed against single parent families, victims of domestic abuse, and gay people; ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’ against Romany, travellers and ethnic minorities; and ‘nation’ against citizens of other states. That is, the performances of routine to support the ontological security structures of some have led to the deprivation of resources, and thereby to the ontological insecurity, of others; it is an inherently sacrificial logic.

This dimension of ontological security studies perhaps is the way to reconnect the sub-field with emerging critical IR scholarship more generally. As Giddens (1991: 44) argued, ‘All individuals develop a framework of ontological security of some sort, based on routines of various forms. People handle dangers, and the fears associated with them, in terms of the emotional and behavioural ‘formulae’ which have come to be part of their everyday behaviour and thought.’ It is precisely this turn to focus on the management of dread at the level of the ‘everyday’ – and the related, but potentially distinct analytical move to study diverse ‘vernacular’ narrations of it – that we argue offers a promising connection and avenue for the further development of ontological security studies within and beyond the discipline of IR. Here the biographical narratives of the state and individual subjects of (in)security provide a fruitful point of intersection between these otherwise discrete intellectual currents, which we seek to bring into closer conversation.

Dread, the everyday, and the vernacular

By now, a growing number of scholars have suggested that one of the main absences in the way in which ‘security’ has been approached in IR is that academic analysis has tended to speak ‘for’ people, rather than understand what ‘security’ may mean for those people at the level of the everyday (Jarvis and Lister 2013; reference removed for anonymity). Such an elitist bias, moreover, straddles so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ divides, *both* of which for the most part have privileged the rhetoric, speech acts, and (in)securitizing moves of politicians, policy-making communities, security professionals, private security companies, and so on.

Importantly, however, the recent turn in IR to the ‘everyday’ as a category of analysis – with its alternative temporal stress on rhythm and repetition and scalar emphasis on the micro and proximate – is not in and of itself a corrective to this kind of bias; Cohn’s (1987) seminal article ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals’ retains a focus on the elite world of technostrategic planning, for example. Equally, Bigo’s (2000, 2015) research on the everyday interactions of police and other security professionals offers a fascinating sociological understanding of elite cultures, but equally runs the risk of perpetuating the exclusion of non-elite meanings and experiences of (in)security.

Furthermore, as the work of Huysmans (2014), Guillaume and Huysmans (2013), and Noxolo and Huysmans (2009) has emphasised, the category of the everyday is itself not straightforwardly separate from, but rather infused with exceptionalist logics and practices of (in)security. For this reason, the everyday is taken by governmental apparatuses of security to be a strategically vital domain – as illustrated by the UK government’s ‘Protect and Survive’ campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s right up to posters in public spaces today enjoining

‘Citizen-Detectives’ to be vigilant and call counter-terrorism hotlines if they deem others’ behaviours to be ‘suspicious’ (Vaughan-Williams 2008).

‘Handyman? Pest Controller? Bomb Maker? They’re making bombs, so naturally terrorists will try to conceal their activities’, says the latest counter-terrorism poster campaign released by the London Metropolitan Police, ‘But sometimes they can leave tell-tale signs. Signs we need your help in spotting [...] If you notice anything suspicious or out of the ordinary CALL THE CONFIDENTIAL ANTI-TERRORIST HOTLINE ON 0800 789 321’ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – London Metropolitan Counter-Terrorism Poster (2015)



What this poster and critical work on everyday (in)security reminds us is that dread and the ordinariness of the everyday are not dichotomous, as Laing and Giddens’ work tends to imply; some apparatuses of security purportedly designed to manage dread may end up performatively (re)producing it. If crisis conditions become embedded into and are therefore rendered as ‘normal’ throughout everyday life then routine and dread have a far more

complex and mutually entangled relationship, which, importantly, will affect different people in different ways. This is precisely what Huysmans forewarned when he argued that the defining characteristic of the post-Cold War age will be the collapse of daily and ontological security: ‘The void upon which the symbolic order rests (death as the undetermined) – that which is normally hidden behind the daily security struggle – risks being rendered visible in the middle of the daily security problematic’ (Huysmans 1998: 244).

An alternative genealogy of the ‘everyday’ – one that pays specific attention to non-elite constructions, meanings, and experiences of (in)security and its attendant rhythms and scales – can be found in the feminist and gender literature on security and international relations, which for more than thirty years has stressed the importance of the mundane, routine, and quotidian aspects of daily life. Instead of focusing on everyday cultures of security professionals or the strategic role of the everyday in governmental apparatuses of security, this work has sought to recover the political subject of (in)security and her views and experiences. But while the maxim that ‘the international is personal’ was firmly established in 1990 with the publication of Enloe’s classic *Banana’s, Beaches, and Bases*, the extent to which this research agenda has permeated beyond gendered analyses of the violence of the everyday has itself been questioned by feminist and gender scholars (Wibben 2011).

Kathleen Blee’s (2003) extraordinary work alongside the racist groups of the United States – attending rallies, working alongside those that she wanted to understand – stands out as an exception in this regard.

Building on this long and important lineage – and connecting with extant work in other areas of the discipline including International Political Economy (Elias and Rethel 2015; Seabrooke 2007) – an emerging strand of scholarship is that associated with ‘vernacular’ security studies. Understanding *how* citizens (sometimes not unproblematically referred to as ‘ordinary people’) construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own

vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge, and categories of understanding has been referred to as ‘vernacular security’. This means, for Bubandt (2005), that ‘security’ should not be limited in use simply to an analytical category, but rather understood as socially situated, and as a discursively defined practice. Security, here, means different things to different people in different places and at different times such that some may jauntily call counter-terrorism hotlines, whereas others may fear reprisals for doing so because of their subject position. For this reason, security is of course not only an essentially contested concept, but is also an innately political category of understanding. The ‘vernacular’ part of this strand of work indicates the importance of the local, of the specific – this is a strand of work that emanates from anthropology. Crucially, however, vernacular security studies is not about the separateness of security description and understanding in different locales, but rather seeks to understand non-elite knowledge, categories of experience, and articulations of self and Other in relation to broader cultural contexts and through the lens of contemporary globalisation. Furthermore, in its commitment to investigating empirically the biographical narratives of the individual, vernacular security studies are linked directly to the theoretical commitments and structures of ontological security, as outlined in the Laing-Giddens genealogy.

In this regard we might point to the ethnographic work of Gillespie (2007) and Hoskins and O’ Loughlin (2007), which used focus groups to understand the ways in which television and media are chosen by audiences and mutually constitute readings of security between audiences and media. Similarly, Jarvis and Lister’s (2012, 2013) research used the same method in order to investigate contemporary expressions of the relationship between counter-terrorism policy and experiences of British citizenship. Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2015a, 2015b) triangulated survey and narrative research in order to explore how public perceptions and experiences of threat and (in)security differ according to identity, ethnicity,

religion, class, gender, location, and generation, and how ‘vernacular’ theories are ultimately ambivalent in both reproducing and in some cases disrupting elitist frameworks of meaning and understanding. What the vernacular security research agenda, building on the insights of feminist and gender work, potentially brings to ontological security studies, therefore, is a more nuanced and ‘bottom-up’ empirical analysis of the contemporary international politics of dread management. Equally, the ontological security studies gives vernacular theorising a much-needed conceptual framework in order to understand the relationship between dread and particular identity claims, the use of contrastive others, and other devices drawn upon in ‘everyday security speak’.

So far, however, the academic literature on vernacular security studies per se – more so than the everyday – is very limited. It is, though, illustrative to think of how the term – vernacular security – has been used in, as it were, the vernacular. One particularly pertinent example comes from the American photographer, James D. Griffioen (see Figure 2). He has a display of twenty seven images of boarded up buildings, described as follows: ‘In Detroit, the battle against diabolical intruders does not end until there is no more metal or anything else of value inside a structure. Somewhere between traditional measures of security and total abandonment, property owners use whatever resources and materials they have at their disposal to secure a building. This has resulted in a unique typology of buildings protected by an unintentionally beautiful array of defenses.’ Griffioen entitles this collection of images as ‘Vernacular Security’ and this points in yet another direction in which the visual politics of dread management might be studied at vernacular sites.

Figure 2 – ‘Vernacular Security’, by James Griffioen



Nevertheless, despite (or rather because of) the openings provided for by vernacular security studies, one problem has been that for some scholars the subject matter of the research of analysts such as Blee, Gillespie, O’ Loughlin, Hoskins, and others is not central to the traditional self-image of IR. Again, we are back at the dispute over the boundaries of the discipline and, ironically, its own sense of ontological (in)security. But let’s look again at the subject matter. In her study, Blee (2003: 80) argues that ‘Racist groups elaborate and systematize existing everyday white beliefs that African Americans, Hispanics, and other people of color harm the security or privileges of whites.’ Here, everyday beliefs and discourses connect to broader patterns of violence because of security concerns understood through racialised – and hence international and globalised – identities. Unless one holds to the narrow view that the study of IR can only be about states, how can such issues raised by both the ‘everyday’ and ‘vernacular’ turns not be central to the discipline? Perhaps the

challenge of both turns is precisely that, against the disciplining and policing moves towards the closure of the discipline, we see in their wake a radical fracturing, displacement, and opening up of what we mean by the field of ‘the international’.

Even if one can argue that everyday and vernacular securities should be part of the discipline, however, a significant problem emerges. What methods are appropriate to engage this understanding of the international? Conventionally, security studies in both ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ guises would look at the speeches of political leaders, perhaps supplemented with elite interviews; others might seek to quantify actions to produce a systematic and rational choice calculation. But a commitment to ‘everyday/vernacular security studies’ requires a commitment to access the ‘security speak’ of those voices otherwise excluded from mainstream analyses. There have already been some reflections on how to do this, but we need to look beyond conventional methods used in IR and security studies. In *Doing Narrative Research*, for example, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008) examine the roles of personal narratives, arguing that such stories should not be given some objective status, of course, but that they indicate who people believe themselves to be, and how that structures attitudes, routines and behaviours in the face of dread. This narrative approach clearly has a direct connection with ontological security research: such narratives are the storylines that provide biographical (dis)continuities and ontological (in)securities of the kind referred to earlier.

The move here to discuss the nature of ‘everyday’ and ‘vernacular’ security studies has been to illustrate a potentially important and productive connection between ontological security studies – in the strand that we have defined – and a wider and emergent body of literature in the field. Ontological security structures can embed processes that deprive some of the resources that underpin the ontological security of others; that is, the ontological security of some can lead to the ontological insecurity – or dread – of others (reference removed for

anonymity). To understand these sacrificial dynamics and their effects on diverse multi-ethnic publics, it is necessary to render visible everyday 'security speak'. Arguably, there has never been a better time to undertake such work. Traditional ethnographic approaches have their place, as do focus group approaches, but there is now, through social media, the opportunity to also understand vernacular 'security speak' in a still more direct fashion.

By taking a point in time following a particular incident, it is now possible to track everyday negotiations and vernacular understandings of a security issue while potentially circumventing – if not entirely escaping – traditional problems of the 'researcher effect' associated with ethnographic research. When in 2010 there was a demonstration by a group purporting to speak for Islam ('Muslims against Crusades') against the commemoration of Armistice Day, the meaning of the demonstration was debated throughout the country. Did 'Muslims Against Crusades' represent British Muslims as a whole? Did they represent a threat to the British way of life? Such debates occurred in many places, but with social media, some have been captured in unusual places. For example, on the Liverpool Football Club message board. Discussion ranged across a number of different opinions as people tried to make sense of this. One wrote of the need for the protestors to deport themselves: 'I always think, if people hate this country and its people so much, why dont they go somewhere else? Last week, i didnt like a bar i was in, i finished my pint, got my coat and went to a different one. I didnt get a big sign and stand at the end of the bar protesting, cause the bouncers would have dropped me on my ass outside. I really dont get it. The simplicity of it is overwhelming.' For another, the problem was 'our' openness and weakness: 'Just imagine what would happen to you if you went to a muslim country and denounced their war heroes and chanted death to their country. absolute joke.' A third sought a meaning in the welfare system: 'Other countries dont have a benefits system as good as ours.' But the same person later in the discussion sought to recalibrate the discussion into how 'we' should think

collectively: ‘The normal UK citizen takes no notice of the BNP/EDL or whatever, but when they see our foreign friends showing disrespect like that yesterday their tolerance is chipped away a little bit more.’ Or perhaps not; the view was met with the comment: ‘This is top drawer wumming. Absolutely superb; I was even fooled for a while’, meaning that the ‘tolerance’ point was a ‘wind up’ in order to provoke a response.⁸

By examining online debates of this sort, routine attitudes and vernacular categories of expression and understanding can be investigated politically. This is because, as Huysmans (1998) argues, the ‘play’ of the signifier security can tell us a great deal not only about individual biographies, but wider social relations in which those utterances are made. They also exist in other forms. Jokes are a powerful way of communicating meaning, of inclusion and of exclusion, and of accessing vernacular claims to ontological security. Again, on the Liverpool message board, we can find ‘A Muslim at work said he had the whole Koran on DVD . i thought it would be iteresting [sic] to check it out so asked him to burn me a copy ... thats when it all kicked off...’⁹ The post quickly enforces the trope of the ‘Muslim’ as outsider, as fanatic, and as violent. Such tropes tell us about broader social narratives and dominant regimes of truth (Rossdale 2015).

These examples are drawn from a single site, but by working on a variety of sites it would be possible to construct everyday ‘security speak’ and, from there, to map broader ontological security and insecurity structures. That is, the normative commitment of vernacular security studies (to connect to citizens, to listen to a wider range of voices), and its focus on methodology (focus groups, ethnography, narrative research, developments in understanding social media discourse) could be powerfully connected to the theoretical commitments and structures of ontological security in new, exciting, and politically significant ways. It would constitute a vernacular turn.

Conclusion

Up until very recently the discipline of IR has proved somewhat resistant to a full engagement with ontological security studies in a move to sure-up the discipline's own ontological security. This resistance has been breached to productive effect by trailblazing scholars such as Mitzen (2006), Steele (2008), and Zarakol (2010) in their move to focus on the state. In so doing, however, the framework of ontological security, as utilised elsewhere in the social sciences, has been altered. There is nothing particularly problematic about this. Laing (1990: 10) wrote in the preface to the *Divided Self* that 'It is to the existential tradition ... that I acknowledge my main intellectual indebtedness.' A tradition can inspire work in new directions, and, perhaps in the same way, Mitzen, Steele, Zarakol and others – albeit in with sometimes competing emphases --, have been inspired by ontological security studies to develop the field to answer new questions.

In this article we have sought to argue that another related track of work on ontological security and the international, epitomised by Kinnvall (2006) and to some extent Huysmans (1998), can be read as being more in a direct line of development from the work of Laing (1990) and Giddens (1991). Laing certainly has references to the international in his work, even though it is largely an account of clinical encounters. In the preface to the second edition, he wrote of the sufferer who felt that there is an 'atomic bomb' inside her; Laing wrote 'That is a delusion. The statesmen of the world who boast and threaten that they have Doomsday weapons are far more dangerous ...' (Laing 1990: 12). Among a series of contrasts, Laing (1990: 11-12) wrote 'A man who prefers to be dead rather than Red is normal. A man who says he has lost his soul is mad.' Yet the engagement of ontological security studies with the international is far more profound in the work of Giddens, because of his emphasis on the nature of globalisation in late modernity.

The role of Giddens though in the development of ontological security has perhaps been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, his work has developed the concept into a programme of research that has been taken up in a range of disciplines in the social sciences. On the other, his political identity and the nature of his work has been controversial.¹⁰ Giddens' political identity certainly has had some impacts on the development and reach of ontological security in some parts of the social sciences, but there is no doubt that his role in exploring and expanding ontological security has also had a major role in opening the area as an avenue of work for interdisciplinary exploration. In IR that exploration takes two distinct and yet equally legitimate forms. For that strand that we have argued is the one most connected to interdisciplinarity rather than to the discipline itself, there is now the further prospect of developing the approach with the emergent sub-fields of everyday and vernacular security studies in methodologically innovative directions.

Indeed, these sub-fields are intrinsically connected via a mutual interest in biographical narratives of the self. An opportunity exists here to interpret the referent object in ambivalent terms such that ontological claims made by states and citizen-subjects alike might be investigated at the level of the everyday: What are the affective politics of information campaigns as a form of dread management on diverse publics? Whose dread is managed and at what cost for whom? How is dread narrated? In investigating the substantive content of vernacular accounts of ontological security in circulation it is possible to reveal wider societal assumptions, prejudices, and cultures. Such a vernacular turn then holds considerable promise as an empirical research agenda for bringing together the future of ontological security studies and everyday IR.

¹ We recognise that any attempt to categorise a field of study entails the risk of generalisation and over-simplification. We acknowledge that there are differences *within* approaches to ontological

security studies that privilege the state on the one hand and the social on the other. Notwithstanding that point, however, the primary bifurcation to which we refer largely reflects the related and yet distinct psychological (unitary) and sociological (relational) influences in the intellectual genealogy of ontological security studies (see Zarakol 2010).

² The gendered language is deeply engrained throughout the original text.

³ See Giddens (1991: 53-4, 58, 61); Laing (1990: 142).

⁴ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for challenging us on this point.

⁵ See, for example, the critique in Krolikowski (2008).

⁶ Inspired by Laing in the sense that, for Landkildehus (2011: 135), the only influence of Kierkegaard on Giddens was in the treatment of anxiety.

⁷ This line of argument was developed in Cohen and Metzger (1998).

⁸ Respectively, 'Look-Ass-Levi', 'Kayanliverpool', 'FY7reds', and 'DiabyDoesGallas', all posted on 12 November 2010 on <http://forums.liverpoolfc.com/threads/213321-Political-correctness-in-this-country-is-a-joke> [accessed March 2013].

⁹ Posted by 'tony47' in October 2012, at http://thekop.liverpoolfc.com/_joke-time/blog/6468421/173471.html [accessed March 2013]

¹⁰ This can be seen, for example, in within sociology; Tony King, for one, critiqued the dichotomy between the traditional and the post-traditional, and the emphasis on consumption, rather than work, in describing the nature of routines that underpin identities. Giddens (now of course Lord Giddens) has himself has been subject to criticism, for his political activity. A proximity to the Blair Government, as a proponent of the 'third way' in the international relations of states, and latterly accused of being a spokesperson for Blair's policies – epitomised by his press writings on Libya. 'As one-party states go, Libya is not especially repressive. Gadafy seems genuinely popular ... Will real progress be possible only when Gadafy leaves the scene? I tend to think the opposite ... My ideal future for Libya in two or three decades' time would be a Norway of North Africa ... (Giddens 2007).'

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